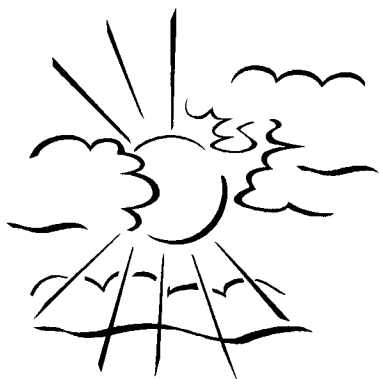


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*Important story at this spot

Articles in Today's Clips

Friday, September 16, 2005

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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The Grand Rapids Press

Letters

September 16, 2005

Saving lives

This is in reference to the death of a 2-year-old Armon Colar ("Suspect in 2-year-old's death unable to explain child's injuries," Press, Sept. 8). Children Protective Services (CPS) appears to have failed to pay attention to the complaint it received about this 2-year-old being seriously hurt.

Why did it take so long? Is it that Child Protective Services doesn't care about kids well-being anymore or is its system broken and unable to respond in a timely manner?

This is a serious case that seems to indicate CPS inability to save the life of a child. In the case of Armon Colar, his mother had three cases with CPS for neglect and child safety issues, which indicated the danger to the child.

I know that children should be with their mom, but in this case it appears to have cost the life of little Armon.

Child Protective Services wasn't able to save Armon's life by its failure to act immediately. The question is what CPS is ready to do now in order to avoid future and unnecessary deaths of children such as Armon Colar.

If they CPS can't, who will?

ROSALINA A. REYES

Empire man charged with sexually assaulting girl, 14

Traverse City Record-Eagle

September 15, 2005

FROM STAFF REPORTS

EMPIRE - An Empire man is charged with felony criminal sexual conduct after he allegedly forced an underage girl to have sex.

Scott Donald Purdom, 43, is held in the Grand Traverse County Jail on \$250,000 bond after he allegedly assaulted a 14-year-old girl on Aug. 24.

Purdom was arraigned in 86th District Court Tuesday on one felony charged of third-degree CSC, punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

The victim allegedly told police Purdom forced her to have intercourse at a house in Empire.

Purdom is scheduled to appear in court for a preliminary examination on Sept. 27.

News that kids were kept in cages shocks neighbors

An anonymous tip led to police raid on home where 11 adopted children with special needs lived.

By Josh Getlin / Los Angeles Times

WAKEMAN, Ohio -- They looked like perfectly normal kids, riding bicycles in the streets and playing on a plastic jungle gym in their back yard. But neighbors had one nagging question about Michael and Sharen Gravelle's 11 adopted children:

How could all of them, 1 to 14 years in age, possibly live in such a small home?

People are friendly but private in this rural community west of Cleveland, and nobody dared to intrude. But when police raided the five-room house recently, based on an anonymous tip, they got an answer: Nine of the kids were forced to sleep in wooden cages, and the Gravelles didn't think anything was wrong, officials said.

"I've never seen anything like this," Huron County Sheriff's Lt. Randy Sommers said earlier this week. "I've seen cases of children in closets, in basements, in outbuildings, in cars. This is the first I've seen of children in cages."

The Gravelles have denied abusing or neglecting the children. In a statement released by their attorney, David Sherman, the couple defended their actions, saying the homemade "enclosures" were meant to protect youngsters who set fires and injured each other.

The 11 kids were placed temporarily in four foster homes. They are all special-needs children, with problems including fetal alcohol syndrome and HIV to autism and Down syndrome.

"The children have been out of control and have caused serious harm to themselves and each other," said Sherman, adding that Michael Gravelle built the enclosures to give the kids a secure space while their parents slept at night.

The Gravelles' "motives and intentions were good. They would never harm a child," Sherman said.

As she stood on her small front porch down the street from the Gravelle home, Mildred Timperman, Sharen's mother, angrily defended her daughter.

"All I want is for her to come back home, and we want the children back, too," she said, leaning on a walker and shooing two dogs away. "I don't believe a word of this, that they were mistreating children."

The revelations came as a shock to neighbors. Still, most of them said they knew little about the reclusive couple, who had lived in their home for 10 years.

Michael, 56, is a laborer, and his wife, 57, stayed home to raise the children, according to court records. The Gravelles are white; their 11 children are black.

"I'm stunned, if these charges are true," said Sherri Hall, who lives next to the Gravelles. "Who's responsible? It's incredible such a thing could go on."

The Gravelle house, a two-story gray-green structure, has three small bedrooms, according to investigators. A wooden structure near the house was used by the family as a church.

The Gravelles told investigators that they were home-schooling their family.

When investigators searched the house, they found few toys lying about. The children's wooden cages had no bedding -- only mats -- and some reeked of urine.

"These weren't normal kids' rooms," Sommers said.

But officials also conceded that the children seemed happy and well-behaved when they were taken away to foster homes. None appeared to have any signs of physical abuse. They did not look traumatized, at least outwardly, Sommers said.

A key issue is where the children came from, and how a home with such conditions could have been ignored by child welfare officials for so many years. None of the children was adopted in Huron County; they all came from adoption authorities in other states, officials said. Some investigators have theorized that the Gravelle's took in the children to pocket welfare subsidies for their care.

Although no figures have been released, a 2001 divorce proceeding between Michael and Sharen, ultimately dropped, indicated that she was then receiving an estimated \$4,265 per month in adoption subsidies and Social Security benefits for seven children. The couple adopted four additional children in subsequent years.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Abuse council needs support of community

Port Huron Times Herald

September 16, 2005

If you haven't greeted Chuck Santoni at the Birchwood Mall, this is the day to do it. The WSAQ-FM disc jockey has been on the mall's roof since Sunday. He will leave after 6 p.m. today.

The 10th annual roofsit raises money for the St. Clair County Child Abuse/ Neglect Council. The organization serves our community with a variety of programs that teach children to guard against sexual abuse and teach adults to identify and prevent child abuse.

You can make your pledge by calling (866) 852-KIDS. You also can make your donation by 6 p.m. today at the main entrance of Birchwood Mall.

The first anniversary of the *The Weekend Spin*, the *Times Herald's* entertainment magazine will be celebrated this evening at Enigma Niteclub, 402 Quay St., in downtown Port Huron. There will be music and dancing. Stop by. Like *Spin*, the 8 p.m. party won't be the same without you.

Granholt cracks down on violent video games

2 new laws are signed Wednesday



By Kirk Yuhnke

Mid Michigan - (09/14/05)--Gov. Jennifer Granholm is getting tough when it comes to underage children buying violent and sexually explicit video games.

She was in Flint Wednesday to put her seal of approval on two new laws. They basically make it illegal for any store to sell video games rated M or NC-17 to anyone under the age of 17.

The governor says she wants Wednesday's press conference to send a message to stores that are thinking about selling to kids.

Gene Mayhew is a manager at Jelly Beans. They have a store on Fenton Road that sells plenty of video games. He says kids try to buy adult games. He says that doesn't fly when he's running the shop.

"You've got to have mom or dad here if you're going to buy something with parental guidance on it," he said.

And that's exactly what the governor is forcing stores across the state to do.

"We want to put the ammunition in the hands of parents," Granholm said. "If a parent wants their children to have these games, then they can buy it for them."

Wednesday she signed two laws that will help police enforce that -- something the Genesee County sheriff says he plans to do with more sting operations.

"Every family wants to feel that their kids are not getting materials that they ought not to have," said Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell.

Starting Dec. 1, if you plan on buying a game with an M rating then you better plan on bringing an ID with you. If you're underage, then you better plan on bringing mom and dad instead.

Mayhew says where he works not much will change; they already enforce the game ratings. But he's happy to see the new laws.

"It makes the parents more aware of what their kids are buying if they're going to have to be accompanied by the parent to buy whatever the hippest video game is or the most violent thing is," he said.

If a store is caught trying to sell any of the adult games to someone under 17, there's a pretty heavy penalty -- a \$5,000 fine and the possibility of up to one year behind bars.

The governor says the next step is educating parents about what their children are playing.

Video Game Industry Filing Lawsuit Against State

TV-6 News

Sep 15, 2005, 05:43 AM

The video game industry says it will file a lawsuit challenging Michigan's new law that bars retailers from selling or renting violent games to those ages 17 and younger. The Entertainment Software Association says the law is unconstitutionally vague and limits residents' 1st amendment rights.

The announcement came after Governor Granholm signed 2 more bills aimed at keeping adult-rated games with sexually-explicit or violent material away from children.

Keep the children in school

The Grand Rapids Press

Friday, September 16, 2005

Children who are out of school and unsupervised are costly to communities. The Grand Rapids Board of Education plan to fight elementary school truancy by joining with social services, the police and the prosecutor's office is encouraging. The board is wise to try to resolve a child's problems early before they end up dropping out. Prosecuting those whose children have excessive absences will send a strong message about the value of education.

Last year, a staggering 633 elementary students enrolled in Grand Rapids Public Schools missed more than 20 days. Grand Rapids has a revised elementary school attendance policy that recognizes the role that the school, the Grand Rapids Police, the Kent County Prosecutor's Office and the state Department of Human Services can all play in reducing truancy. The poor statistics have obviously led to greater focus and cooperation among the groups. Under the policy:

A letter will be sent to the student's parent or guardian after four unexcused absences.

If attendance does not improve after the letter, a district public safety officer will make a home visit and inquire if support services are needed.

Continued poor attendance will force the district to contact the Grand Rapids Police. An officer will visit the home within one week.

The police will forward reports and documents to Kent County prosecutors for possible prosecution after 20 unexcused absences.

Michigan law requires students between the ages of 6 to

16 to attend school. Parents take on a greater responsibility when younger children miss class.

First-graders are not skipping school to hang out. Studies show that family factors -- family problems or parental attitudes are to blame for younger truancy. According to a study by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, 50 percent of truant students don't go to school because they don't want to go. Another 25 percent feel pushed out or bullied, while the remainder report external problems, such as family issues.

The city schools' use of human services can address social or health problems in the home, and the police and prosecutors can deal with those unwilling to make an attitude adjustment.

Children out of school are at a higher risk to be harmed, commit crimes, do drugs or get pregnant. They become social and economic burdens on taxpayers. The biggest cost, however, is to the students themselves. They are missing out on much-needed education. The longer they are truant, the less likely it is that they will ever graduate and be productive citizens.

The Grand Rapids administration, which is dealing with a 40 percent drop-out rate, is smart to target elementary school students and their parents. Having children in school is a parent's duty. School boards are obliged to hold them to it.

Free fun at the fair for folks hit by Katrina

Sunday, September 11, 2005

By Rosemary Parkerrparker@kalamazoogazette.com 388-2734

ALLEGAN -- Allegan County Fair officials, carnival workers and food vendors welcomed with kind words and lots of freebies a busload of Hurricane Katrina survivors on Saturday.

The hurricane evacuees, along with the soldiers who accompanied them, got all the free food and rides they could handle in an afternoon.

Among those taking advantage of the fair-time fun were Bryan and Saprina Joseph, who laughed and groaned, respectively, through a ride on Freak Out, one of the more turbulent rides the fair offers.

"I had a ball," Saprina said afterwards.

It had been just such a hot, sunny day after Katrina blew through New Orleans, Bryan Joseph said.

They thought the worst was over. And then the waters rose and their nightmare began.

For the past four days, they have been living at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, searching the Internet for word of Saprina's daughter and 8-year-old grandson, who became separated from each other during the storm.

They located her daughter just Friday night, in San Antonio, she said. But there is no word yet on the child.

New Orleans native Bruce Kinard, 53, said, "I can only be blessed I'm alive."

He hoped to use the outing to get a feel for Michigan, to determine whether it may be a place for him to live permanently or whether he'd rather try to relocate closer to his home state.

He said he thought he'd been through the worst with Hurricane Betsy, which hit in 1965, but

"Katrina showed up Betsy. ... It was kind of scary."

Kinard said he felt lucky to get a spot on a Delta Airlines plane out of the disaster zone.

"We're glad you are here with us," fair manager Terry Bonnell said as the passengers filed off of the bus at the fair's main gate to be fitted with wristbands and given food vouchers at the start of the afternoon.

"I think is a wonderful opportunity to do something for folks who have been through a very tough time from people who have been very blessed," volunteer Diana Gilmer said. "I just hope they have a good time at the fair."

Note: Calhoun County DHS staff enroll evacuees in any state or federal programs they qualify for, help locate suitable housing for them and work with MDOT to provide transportation to the housing.

Hurricane exposes scandal of poverty

Government, workers should be better organized to make the nation succeed

By James P. Hoffa

Hurricane Katrina has not only ravaged our Gulf Coast, it has exposed the scandal of our nation's poverty.

In 1964, my father said, "For too long have too many of our children been left to fend for themselves in a sea of circumstances that made their lot hopeless. Too long have we chosen to ignore those who, because of lack of skill, education or because of their race, have not shared in the nation's affluence."

The tragedy in New Orleans was shameful: Needy Americans without adequate food or medicine. Unsanitary living conditions. Underprivileged citizens unable to access medical care. A federal government that was unresponsive to the plight of our nation's poor. And that was before the storm hit.

Mayor Milton Tutwiler of Winstonville, Miss., summed it up: "No one would have checked on a lot of the people in these parishes while the sun shined, so am I surprised that no one has come to help us now? No."

The United States has split in two.

One America exists where the rich are able to live the American Dream and enjoy the best that life has to offer, while the other America has to reckon with disappearing jobs, declining wages, no health insurance and a paycheck-to-paycheck existence.

The other America is growing. Last year, 1.1 million Americans joined the 36 million already living below the poverty line.

Ever since Ronald Reagan, so-called "big government" has been demonized. Tax cuts for the wealthy and a free ride for corporations are religion in Washington.

But our taxes used to pay for things that we are missing now. Our nation lacks needed infrastructure. The failure to invest in our ports, bridges and levees has made us more vulnerable to terrorists and natural disasters.

Privatization and downsizing have put unqualified workers on the front lines of our nation's homeland security.

This is not the America I want for my grandchildren.

In the wake of the worst disaster in our nation's history, some questions need to be asked and answered:

Do we want a political system that rewards only the wealthy and neglects the working poor? Is it good for America to have the divide between the upper and lower classes grow greater every year? Why is national health care treated as a budget issue instead of a matter of human dignity?

As I write this, Teamsters from across the country -- including members from Michigan and my father's home local, Local 299 in Detroit -- are in the Gulf of Mexico region, driving trucks and delivering supplies as part of the relief effort. Sadly, many Teamsters who have homes in the affected states are still unaccounted for. America is at its best when its citizens pull together during times of crisis, because that is the true strength of our nation: The American People.

During the last century, Americans have consistently lifted themselves out of poverty and into the middle class through union membership. By bargaining collectively, generations of American workers have improved their lives significantly.

Some say the need for unions is past, now that workers already have a 40-hour week, time off and governmental oversight of workplace safety. I say the need has never been greater because the middle-class gains we have made during the last 100 years are being wiped away faster than I ever thought possible.

The desire for respect and dignity never changes. As long as working people are underpaid, overworked or otherwise mistreated, there will be the need for a union.

The dignity of American workers cannot be exported, privatized or downsized. Respect for American workers should be increased, not diminished. And I don't believe the government should set up barriers to discourage working Americans from joining a union and improving their lives.

To help rebuild the middle class and restore dignity to American workers, a group of growing, dynamic unions have formed the Change To Win Coalition to spur new organizing efforts. Our founding convention will be held in St. Louis later this month.

To fight the political and business forces that are undermining American workers, we must have more union members in this country. Instead of simply throwing more money at politicians and hoping things change for the better, organizing the unorganized is the top priority of the Change To Win Coalition.

What the government and the people of our great country need is to be better organized. Government needs to better organize its priorities -- including its emergency management. And working people need organized labor like never before.

James P. Hoffa is president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Please mail letters to The Detroit News, Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226, or fax them to (313) 222-6417 or e-mail them to letters@detnews.com.

Former boyfriend arraigned in slaying Victim's family says he refused to accept breakup

Friday, September 16, 2005

BY AMALIE NASH

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Prosecutors charged that Robert Lee Green broke into his former girlfriend's Superior Township home Tuesday morning and repeated stabbed her until she ran mortally wounded from the house and collapsed in a neighbor's yard.

Green, 33, cried quietly at the podium Thursday as he was arraigned on charges of entering a residence without permission and first-degree murder in the death of 26-year-old Jennifer Bennett, the mother of his toddler son. He was held without bond pending a preliminary hearing Sept. 27.

It was an emotional afternoon for Bennett's relatives, who waited for nearly three hours in the lobby of the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department to watch Green appear for a short hearing. They said the couple dated for nearly two years, but he refused to accept it when she broke off the relationship in the spring.

"She was a good person and had her whole life ahead of her," said Bob Moon, Bennett's uncle. Bennett left behind two children, 7-year-old Desirae and 16-month-old Trey, whose father is Green. The children are now with relatives.

Authorities said Green was waiting inside when Bennett returned to her home on Stamford Road about 9 a.m. Tuesday to pick up paperwork for an errand. Bennett was stabbed several times in the head, back and neck, Washtenaw County Assistant Prosecutor Anthony Kendrick said. Green then stole her car and drove to Redford Township, police said.

Kendrick said Green has made incriminating statements since his arrest, but did not elaborate. Sheriff's Cmdr. Dave Egeler said police do not know whether Green expected Bennett to return that morning when he broke into her home or whether he was surprised when she entered. Police do not believe he had a key.

Bennett, who worked for Hyundai, dropped by her home around 9 a.m. to pick up some paperwork for a visit to a Secretary of State office.

She had a personal protection order preventing Green from contacting her and had called police several times because of problems with him in the past, court records show. Although Bennett received the PPO in June, it wasn't served to Green until last week, when he showed up at her home and refused to leave, Egeler said.

"He was able in the daytime to break into her house, and unfortunately by the time we got calls, it was too late," Sheriff Daniel Minzey said. "The success of a PPO is when police are notified if it is violated and can take action."

Sheriff's records show officers responded to Bennett's home three times in August and September. The August call was for a civil stand-by, but it's unclear if it involved Green or

Bennett, Egeler said. Police went there Sept. 5 on a report that Green refused to leave, but he was gone when deputies arrived, Egeler said.

Police learned of the active PPO and later located Green to advise him of the order. But legally he could not be arrested for violating the PPO because he had not been served and didn't have the opportunity to comply with the order, Egeler said.

On Sunday, Bennett called police to report that her purse had been stolen a few days prior and was returned to her front porch with items missing, Egeler said.

Green, whose 6-foot-9-inch frame prompted court staff to readjust the cameras, spoke quietly through tears during his arraignment. Green said he was divorced with one child and lived with his mother in Southfield. Magistrate Camille Horne appointed a public defender to represent him and entered a not guilty plea on his behalf.

In arguing against bond, Kendrick also pointed to Green's criminal record - which included 1990 convictions for unarmed robbery and assault with intent to commit murder. The prosecutor said Green attempted to kill a police officer responding to the robbery in Macomb County in 1989. He received a 10- to 15-year prison sentence, records show.

Bennett's family members - an uncle, aunt, cousin and the cousin's husband - said they were unaware of Green's past. Her mother, Judith Bennett, was not at the arraignment. Bennett was preceded in death by her father.

Kim Suter, Bennett's cousin from Indianapolis, said Bennett had recently been hired by Hyundai and worked for Toyota before that. She described Bennett as very self-sufficient, but turned away in tears and shook her head when asked to speak further about Bennett, a 1997 Saline High graduate. Bennett received a business degree from Cleary College last year.

Nikki Raymor worked with Bennett in classified advertising at the Observer and Eccentric Newspapers some years ago and said Bennett attended her wedding. "She was just a sweetie and great to work with," Raymor said.

A neighbor who lives a block from Bennett's home said she was a happy and bubbly person - but he knew she feared Green. The neighbor, who would only give his first name of Madison, said he spoke with Bennett Saturday and she said Green had driven by her home five times that day. Bennett wrote in her PPO application that she feared for her life.

Madison said he knew something was wrong Tuesday when Bennett wasn't online for their daily instant message chats. He said she had great knowledge about cars and enjoyed spending time with her children.

"We just clicked and she was a good friend. Very classy," Madison said. "She's going to be missed. I just wish I had known and something could have been done."

A funeral for Bennett is planned for 2 p.m. Sunday at Nie Life Funeral Home, 2400 Carpenter Road. A memorial fund for Bennett's children is being established, but the details were not available this morning.

Amalie Nash can be reached at anash@annarbornews.com or (734) 994-6832.

Domestic violence still a tragedy in our midst Crimes persist despite community remedies

Friday, September 16, 2005

Ann Arbor News

The tragic killing this week of Jennifer Bennett, allegedly by a man police say is a former boyfriend and father of one of her two small children, shattered the sensibility of those accustomed to quiet neighborhoods and the feeling that such violence just doesn't happen here. But it does happen here, and not so infrequently. Bennett's death on Tuesday at her Superior Township home occurred just four months after the murder of Robynn Page at her Ypsilanti Township apartment, allegedly by a former boyfriend and father of two of her four children. Less than a year before Page's death, Dianne Oduntan was slain in a townhouse near Bennett's home in what authorities called a murder-suicide involving her boyfriend.

It's not only such killings that indicate the presence of domestic violence in our midst, however. Scores of domestic assaults are occurring with disturbing regularity. SafeHouse, Washtenaw County's nonprofit agency aiding victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, last year served some 4,000 women and children; 500 of them stayed at the agency's shelter.

Domestic violence also is sometimes happening despite some protective remedies available or ostensibly available to prevent them. Bennett, for example, in June requested and received a personal protection order from the court. It denied her former boyfriend, Robert Lee Green, who yesterday was arraigned on a charge of first-degree murder, entry into her home or place of employment. It also denied him the freedom to approach her in any other public place or on any other private property. But according to the county sheriff's department, the PPO still had not been served on Green when Bennett reported him on her porch, refusing to leave, on Sept. 5. By the time an officer arrived, Green reportedly had left.

The department notes an officer later that day encountered Green, and verbally served him notice of the PPO. But because the notice came after Green's alleged appearance on Bennett's porch, his presence there could not constitute a violation. He therefore couldn't be taken into custody.

Whose responsibility it was to serve Green the PPO after Bennett requested and received it in June, we don't yet know. It's not unusual, however, for weeks and months to pass before PPOs get served by court officers, the sheriff department's civil service unit or other representatives. Courts here and nationally must do all they can to swiftly administer personal protection orders, and police must speedily respond to them and to any and all calls for assistance from victims. But even where officials are doing that, more women who are assaulted are tending not to report their assaults than do, according to advocates. Part of that may be because abusers often dramatically escalate their violence when a woman leaves or tries to leave their relationship because he wants to reassert control and ownership. Moreover, once violence begins in a relationship, it almost always gets worse and more frequent.

Domestic violence is happening more in our community than many may be aware of, or wish to admit.

There are many, though, aware of the extent of the problem and want to help. If you're in need of their assistance, call the crisis line of the Domestic Violence Project/SafeHouse at (734) 995-5444.

Time to repay SafeHouse for services

Shelter needs financial help from people in community

Friday, September 16, 2005

Ann Arbor News

For 30 years SafeHouse, Washtenaw County's only domestic violence shelter, has been a haven for victims desperately in need of care and understanding.

It's now SafeHouse that needs assistance, however. Its operating budget totals \$300,000 less than it did three years ago, though the needs of those seeking its assistance are greater than ever. In 2003, for example, SafeHouse took on the added responsibility of assisting sexual assault victims who previously had been aided by the Sexual Assault Crisis Center.

An event celebrating SafeHouse's three decades of service to the community Saturday night is sold out. But SafeHouse needs more private contributions than tickets sold for the event can provide. If you wish to make a tax-deductible contribution, checks can be made out to SafeHouse Center, and mailed to P.O. Box 7052, Ann Arbor 48107.

Private donations to the nonprofit actually are up. But public revenue has fallen as federal and state governments struggling with their own deficits trim their allowances for nonprofits.

SafeHouse also is having to contend with efforts to retrieve revenue that auditors say is owed to the state. Its investigators have probed SafeHouse since former executive director Susan McGee resigned in April 2002 amid allegations that she fabricated the organization's annual audits for at least 10 years.

But the shelter's new executive director, Barbara Niess, and its board of directors have worked hard to put its fiscal matters in order. For example, the board added certified public accountants and created a finance-audit committee that's responsible for selecting and contracting independent auditors. Niess hired a finance manager and staff.

SafeHouse is vital to the community. Every day, victims of abuse - adults and children - use its shelter, its counseling and crisis intervention services, its domestic violence and sexual assault support groups, its sexual assault response team. They rely on SafeHouse's embrace and its advocacy.

Now, it's SafeHouse that needs help from the community.

Michigan Report

September 15, 2005

MOST CUTS DROPPED FROM COMMUNITY HEALTH BUDGET

Nearly all cuts to Medicaid and Department of Community Health programs were jettisoned under the compromise 2005-06 budget bill for the department approved Thursday by a House-Senate conference committee.

Even the one cut on which the House, Senate and Governor Jennifer Granholm had agreed – a 4 percent reduction to Medicaid providers – was softened to a 3 percent cut.

The DCH budget ([SB 267](#)) does include new co-payments for Medicaid recipients – \$1 for outpatient services, \$2 on physician services, \$3 on emergency room visits and \$50 on the first day of an in-patient hospital stay, according to the Senate Fiscal Agency. The co-pays would raise \$2.3 million in new revenue.

But most cuts were dropped.

Republicans wanted to discontinue Medicaid coverage for 30,000 caretaker relatives and for 13,000 19- and 20-year-olds, but these recipients will retain their coverage. The budget instead calls for \$12.5 million in general fund savings by changing the payments to hospitals for caretaker relatives.

A \$20 million reduction to the Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Healthy agency was restored. MIChild enrollment policies would remain unchanged.

Dental coverage for adults was restored. The positions of surgeon general, chief nurse executive and drug czar would be retained after the Legislature sought their elimination. Hearing and vision screening services for schoolchildren were partially restored. The Granholm administration had sought to cut this program.

New Medicare drug plan worries business, too

Thursday, September 15, 2005

By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- It's not just Michigan seniors who are in a quandary over what to do when Medicare's new drug program goes into effect in January.

Some of their former employers are also agonizing about whether to keep their retiree prescription drug programs or drop them so that the federal government's Medicare Part D drug plan takes over.

It's a calculated business decision that could affect everyone's bottom line -- corporations as well as individuals.

"Most employers this year are probably going to just keep their programs in place, although we know some won't," Kathryn Bakich, a vice president with The Segal Co., a New York-based human resources and benefits management company, said Wednesday. "Employers are getting ready for fall (health care) enrollment, and there isn't time to include Medicare (drug) plans. Next year, the story will be different."

A recent survey by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, a national benefits company, shows that 5 percent of large employers and 9 percent of midsize companies will terminate their drug coverage with the birth of Medicare Part D on Jan. 1.

Part D will offset drug expenses for eligible seniors. It requires some co-payments, deductibles and premiums (\$37 a month in premiums on average).

The majority of large employers -- 60 percent -- plan to continue coverage, according to the Mercer survey. Another 14 percent will offer a plan that "wraps around" the Part D benefit and will provide supplemental payments. Others expect to contract with the new drug plans that will be offering prescription drugs under the program.

Medicare beneficiaries can begin signing up for the new drug plans Nov. 15. In Michigan, the state's 1.1 million seniors will be able to choose from 20 drug benefit plans that will provide varied levels of coverage.

If employers decide to stick with their own benefit package, they must inform retirees by Nov. 15 whether their drug benefits compare favorably to the Part D plan. If they are basically the same or better, then retirees can choose their former employer's drug plan. If they are not as good as Part D, they are encouraged to sign up for the government program.

What's keeping many employers from immediately dropping their costly drug coverage is a subsidy Congress slipped into the law in 2003 as a sweetener for businesses, local governments and unions to keep providing benefits.

Plan sponsors who continue to offer drug benefits receive a 28 percent subsidy for eligible drug costs from \$250 to \$5,000 per senior. The maximum subsidy a company could receive in 2006 is \$1,330 per participant.

Employer-sponsored plans must submit an application by Oct. 31 to the federal government to be eligible for the subsidy in 2006.

The financial incentive is a major plus for employers, but many large companies say absent the subsidy they remain committed to providing drug coverage to their retirees.

"We will continue to provide prescription drug coverage," said Carey Osmundson, a spokeswoman for General Motors Corp. "It really is the choice of (retirees) if they want to sign up for Medicare Part D or stay with us."

Beginning Oct. 1, the new drug plans can begin soliciting Michigan retirees. Many observers expect an avalanche of mail to hit boxes that first week and retirees to bombard former employers with calls asking for help.

"Companies can't make the choice for their retirees, but they can and should provide retirees with clear information to help them make an educated decision," said Nancy Davis, a Mercer consultant based in Chicago, in a written statement.

The state of Michigan had hoped to offer state retirees additional options, but the federal government was slow to let employers know the rules.

"We have a very good plan, and we always were confident that we would meet the requirements for the plan to get the subsidy," said David Fink, director of Michigan's Office of the State Employer. "Our problem has been that it's taken so long to get information from the federal government about what other alternatives there were. We frankly thought we would have alternatives to receive greater savings."

Michigan youth prison is sued by group

Advocacy Service claims young offenders are denied adequate schooling, medical care.

Friday, September 16, 2005

By Amy F. Bailey / Associated Press

LANSING -- Young offenders at a private prison in Lake County are not spending enough time in school and those who have mental illnesses and developmental disabilities aren't getting adequate help, according to a federal lawsuit filed Wednesday.

The Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service Inc. filed the lawsuit against state Department of Corrections Director Patricia Caruso, Michigan Youth Correctional Facility warden Frank Elo and the GEO Group Inc., a Florida-based prison-management company that owns and runs the prison. The group filed the lawsuit in federal court in Grand Rapids.

The group wants the court to order improvements at the youth prison near Baldwin.

Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service is going ahead with the lawsuit although it appears the state will end its contract for the prison. Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm likely will veto funding for the prison in the budget for the fiscal year that begins in a few weeks as a way to balance the budget, despite Republican support for keeping the funding in place.

"What happens if she doesn't (veto the funding) or the GEO Group sues the state for breach of contract and keeps inmates at the facility?" asked Tom Masseau, the advocacy group's public policy director. "There are too many unknowns."

GEO said it could not comment directly on the lawsuit, but questioned its timing.

"GEO will vigorously defend the state and our company," GEO said in a written statement. "If we find that the motivation for filing this suit is frivolous or improper, we will pursue and enforce our remedies under the law against the Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service."

State Sen. Michelle McManus, whose northern Michigan district includes the prison, also criticized the lawsuit.

"Just when it seems things can't get any darker for the residents of Lake County, the groups that are against the (prison) found one more stunt to pull," the Lake Leelanau Republican said in a written statement. "This suit was clearly timed for maximum political impact."

In the lawsuit, the advocacy group says young inmates attend class for as little as three hours a week despite a contract that requires 30 hours of weekly instruction for inmates with at least an eighth-grade education.

Isolated inmates and those in detention do not receive any instruction, although they are required to receive some individually, the lawsuit said.

Low-level offenders at the youth prison are housed with inmates convicted of rape and murder because of the facility's high-security classification, making it more likely they will "find themselves the victims of prisoner assaults," the group said in a written statement.

The advocacy group also said more trained counselors are needed at the prison to help many of the young inmates who have developmental disabilities and mental illnesses, said Stacy Hickox, an attorney for the group. The prison has one full-time social worker for 480 inmates, the group said.

The GEO Group countered that it has a contract with the state Department of Community Health to provide mental health services at the youth prison.

Hickox said a high number of inmates at the youth prison are kept in isolation for long periods without recreation time and are limited to a few showers a week for minor offenses. During a recent visit to the prison, Hickox said 25 inmates were in isolation.

GEO said the American Correctional Association facility has accredited the facility, which shows that it meets professional standards of care.

Michigan Report

September 15, 2005

GOVERNOR POISED TO CLOSE YOUTH PRISON

Michigan's six-year experiment with a privately run prison designed to incarcerate minors convicted of violent felonies appears headed for an end.

A Republican-led House-Senate conference committee unanimously approved a Department of Corrections budget bill for 2005-06 that provides \$17.84 million in funding for the Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin and highlighted an equal amount in available cuts that Governor Jennifer Granholm could choose to eliminate instead with her line-item veto.

But Granholm press secretary Liz Boyd said after the vote, "The governor is expected to line-item veto the funding for the contract for the youth facility."

The youth prison question has dominated much of the overall budget debate.

Ms. Granholm wants to close the facility because nowhere near the number of violent young convicts materialized to justify it. Her administration also cites cost inefficiencies.

Lake County leaders and Republicans have countered that the prison is critical to the county's depressed economy and in fact is more efficient than many state-run prisons.

Ms. Boyd said the administration hopes The GEO Group, which owns the facility, can find another use for it once the state discontinues its contract. She said the federal government is looking for bed space in its prison system.

Prior to the vote and Ms. Boyd's comments, GEO spokesperson Dennis Cawthorne said he did not believe the fight to keep the facility open was lost.

"The community up there feels so strongly about this that I don't think they're through fighting," he said.

Sen. Alan Cropsey (R-DeWitt), chair of the conference committee, said Ms. Granholm can either choose to close the youth prison or spend money unnecessarily on other items. Republicans identified \$17.84 million – mostly through employee cost reductions – for Ms. Granholm to veto instead of the youth prison.

"We came up with enough money in savings that are legitimate savings to keep Baldwin open," he said.

Leo Lalonde, a Corrections spokesperson, said the more than \$10 million in employee cost cuts would force delays in needed maintenance and prevent filling employee vacancies.

As expected, the budget dropped Republican efforts to close the Newberry Correctional Facility and Camp Manistique prison – closures the GOP sought as an alternative to closing the youth prison.

The bill (SB 268) leaves funding for prisoner education at current year levels in contrast to the 52 percent cut sought by House Republicans.

It would close three prison facilities as the governor, House and Senate sought: Camps Sauble and Tuscola and the barracks at Marquette's Mangum Farm. Security levels would be reduced at five facilities, again in line with what the governor, House and Senate supported.

Ms. Granholm's proposed changes to sentencing guidelines were dropped.

The bill would trim \$3.9 million from food service through switching from whole to skim milk and eliminating coffee.

Similar to what the House GOP sought, funding for Hepatitis C testing and treatment would be cut by \$1 million with the remaining \$150,000 added to prison health clinic spending.

Two corrections centers, one in Benton Harbor and the other in Saginaw, that house low-level offenders placed in the community prior to parole would be closed because of declining numbers of prisoners eligible to reside there.

Rep. Alma Wheeler Smith (D-Ypsilanti) said she is particularly pleased with the protection of prisoner education funding. "This is a much better conference report than the budget we sent out of the House and the Senate sent out of the Senate," she said.

GENERAL GOVERNMENT: A conference committee unanimously approved a compromise bill for the general government budget that contains funding for several departments, agencies and the Legislature.

The Granholm administration and Republicans reached a compromise on how much to spend on homestead principal residence audits with the GOP scaling back its desire for \$2 million to \$750,000 with the Department of Treasury providing a report to the Legislature on the issue.

For a full report on the general government budget (SB 272), see the Wednesday edition of Gongwer News Service (Gongwer Michigan Report, September 14, 2005).

Young Fives are spared budget cuts

Friday, September 16, 2005

By Jennifer Ackerman-Haywood and Dave Murray
The Grand Rapids Press

Lawmakers have restored full funding for developmental kindergarten programs -- called Young Fives -- after pressure from parents and educators.

State senators proposed cutting in half state aid for students in the programs in the current school year.

But districts said the move would force them to drop the programs and move the children into traditional kindergarten classes. Young Fives students are considered emotionally and academically unprepared for full kindergarten.

State Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, said Thursday he is grateful a conference committee finalizing the budget deal restored the money. He said he is not sure if other programs were cut to make up for saving the Young Fives.

"West Michigan has led the state in Young Five programs, and a lot of districts here prove they can be very successful," he said.

Rockford Superintendent Michael Shibler said he contacted parents with students currently or recently in the program, asking them to call lawmakers.

Local districts would have lost about \$3 million had the cuts survived. Forest Hills would have faced a \$500,000 cut, according to Tim Raymer, the district's assistant superintendent for finance.

Supporters might have to wage the fight again next year. Rep. Glenn Steil, R-Cascade Township, said parents should do more to prepare children.

"It seems parents aren't teaching as much, that they expect schools to prepare them for kindergarten," he said, "and, frankly, our concern is K-12."

Press reporter Steven Harmon contributed to this story.

Macomb reaches out to protect the elderly

With special programs, county agencies and police officers are attuned to the needs of senior citizens.

By Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

September 16, 2005

CLINTON TOWNSHIP -- The graying of Macomb County has prompted law enforcement and service agencies to adapt to the needs of older residents.

From collecting used cellular phones that will be given to senior citizens for emergency calls to a special training academy sponsored by the sheriff's office, efforts are being made to protect the more than 108,000 county residents 65 and older.

That represents about 14 percent of the county's population, according to the 2000 census.

That number is expected to grow to 232,534, or about 25 percent of the population, by 2030, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments estimates.

"The county is becoming increasingly aware of the needs of seniors," said Karen Bisdorf, interim director of the Macomb County Department of Senior Citizen Services.

The department is offering training to police agencies so officers can interact better with elderly residents who may have dementia, an umbrella term for the loss of mental function of the brain such as language, memory, judgment and personality.

Some forms of dementia are caused by specific diseases, such as Alzheimer's. Others are simply associated with aging.

"(Those with dementia) can't cope in today's environment," said Kathryn Ann Kozlinski of the Macomb County Adult Day Services, which conducts the seminars.

Nearly 1,000 officers have taken part in the training, which gives them an overview of dementia and how some traffic violations or actions by seniors may indicate that individuals are suffering from the disease.

For example, police may spot drivers who are weaving, making improper turns and running red lights -- violations that might at first seem like someone driving under the influence.

Kozlinski said officers might encounter dementia patients who unintentionally walk out of the stores with merchandise and those who report a home invasion when they've unintentionally misplaced something.

After officers learned to identify individuals with dementia, they were taught ways to communicate with them.

Among the tips are to approach the person with respect, maintain eye contact and establish some type of rapport.

Officers further learned about ways they could fill out a report to have a county agency intervene and help families of dementia patients.

St. Clair Shores Police Chief Frank Troester knows firsthand about the challenges.

He has an uncle with dementia who got disoriented while he was out getting coffee. He was gone for nearly 14 hours before he was found.

In a community in which 22 percent of the population is composed of senior citizens -- one of the highest percentages in Macomb County -- the training was needed, Troester said.

"This is quality training tailored to our community," he said.

"We have a lot of seniors and we need to take on the concerns of all the residents."

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Play shouldn't be subsidized

FLINT JOURNAL LETTER TO THE EDITOR

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Friday, September 16, 2005

JOURNAL READER

People receiving public assistance should not be able to use the aid to buy restaurant meals or pay for camping in our state parks. Public assistance was not developed for recreation. It is a disgrace to the working force that the state allows these uses of public funds, especially when someone who goes to work every day cannot afford a restaurant meal or a camping trip. It is time to re-evaluate the amount given as benefits.

Sue Bunting
Genesee Township